

## **Watergate and the *Chicago Tribune*: Exposing the Truth**

Shuangyi Hou  
Carbondale Community High School, Carbondale  
Teacher: Nick Weshinsky

Despite the claim that journalists and newspapers should be entirely non-partisan, bias is often unavoidable. Though journalists often try to preserve nonpartisanship, it is rarely done successfully. The *Chicago Tribune* was no stranger to bias. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the *Chicago Tribune* was known throughout America as a “staunchly Republican” newspaper. The Midwest and Chicago, especially, had been dominated by Republican voters and ideals. However, on May 1, 1974, the atmosphere changed entirely. The *Chicago Tribune*, led by editor Clayton Kirkpatrick, published a 246,000-word transcript of President Nixon’s infamous Watergate tapes, exposing Nixon’s criminal activities to the world. The *Tribune* overcame its Republican slant to expose Richard Nixon’s lies and crimes to the American public.

In June 1972, a group of burglars broke into the Watergate apartment complex in Washington, D. C., the Democratic National Committee’s headquarters. Secret plans were made for the burglars to sabotage the Democrats’ plans by copying their files and gaining access to undisclosed documents. Gradually, evidence established the White House, namely, President Richard Milhous Nixon, as the ringleader of a massive government conspiracy to eliminate his enemies. However, the American public was not entirely convinced. Some believed the story, calling for Nixon’s impeachment or resignation. Others, however, refused to believe the accusations, calling them outlandish and ridiculous. The Senate Watergate Committee was immediately set up to investigate the matter. Former White House aide Alexander Butterfield declared that a recording

system installed in 1971 recorded all conversations and phone calls within the White House. This system, Butterfield revealed, could potentially determine Nixon's guilt or innocence. Nixon was then ordered to subpoena the tapes by Chief Justice John Sirica. The transcripts of the tapes were finally released.

*Tribune* publisher Stanton R. Cook and editor Clayton Kirkpatrick immediately decided to publish the complete, 246,000-word transcript the next day. It was the only newspaper in the entire country to do so. Cook stated his motive for immediately publishing the transcripts, saying, "We believe the President's release of the tape transcripts is an event of the utmost significance. It certainly ranks as one of the most historic events affecting government in this century." Some, perhaps, might have been concerned that the *Tribune's* transcripts of the tapes might have provided a Republican slant on the events. However, the *Tribune* team, chiefly Cook and Kirkpatrick, were determined to publish the documents for their journalistic value alone. The *Tribune* kept its publications free of Republican bias, declaring, "We didn't make any changes at all. All we did, actually, was mark the copy for the typesetters—capitalization, paragraphs, that sort of thing. We didn't change anything—either additions or deletions." The importance of the transcripts overshadowed the *Tribune's* political prejudices, pioneering a path of genuine journalistic integrity.

The *Tribune* was no stranger to crunch-time publications, having published the Versailles Treaty in 1919 and the Yalta Papers in 1955, the latter previously kept secret for a decade. However, the monumental task utilized hundreds of staff members to publish the text in a few hours, beating even the Government Printing Office's (GPO)

publication. A special 44-page section of the newspaper was set aside in which the activities of Nixon and his aides were exposed.

Once published, the transcripts provided an in-depth, disturbing view of the president, as well as concrete proof of Nixon's criminal activities. Though the American public was informed of the scandal itself, the tapes cemented the extent of Nixon's wrongdoings. The tapes proved his guilt, revealing his involvement in cover-ups and the initial Watergate debacle itself. The *Tribune's* copies sold out immediately, each copy of the transcripts selling for 15 cents. In truth, this journalism "miracle" was important because it made the details of Watergate widely available to the American public. Because of the cheap price and wide distribution, many Americans across the country were given a "fascinating document" that exposed their president for the criminal he was. Said Dan Haggerty, a faithful *Tribune* reader, "I picked up extra copies [of the transcripts] to send to my friends."

America knew definitely that its president was a criminal. In an editorial on May 9, 1972, Clayton Kirkpatrick declared, "We saw the public man in his first administration, and we were impressed. Now in about 300,000 words we have seen the private man, and we are appalled." The editorial continued, calling for Nixon's resignation and impeachment, a very surprising move due to Kirkpatrick's known Republican leanings.

Though it would have been tempting for Kirkpatrick and the rest of the team to edit the transcripts in favor of Nixon, the *Chicago Tribune* instead guaranteed that the truth would be widely available to the American public. Its publication of the Watergate transcripts helped to mark the end of America's support of President Nixon. Thanks to

the *Chicago Tribune*, Nixon's activities were exposed and America knew the truth at last: that Nixon, indeed, was a crook. [From Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, *The Final Days*; Jeff Hay, ed. *Richard M. Nixon*; "How We Got Transcripts," *Chicago Tribune* May 1, 1974; William Mullen, *Chicago Days: 150 Defining Moments in the Life of a Great City*; "Nixon's Transcription of Watergate Tapes," *Chicago Tribune* May 1, 1974; "Nixon Tape Transcripts Publication Wins Praise," *Chicago Tribune* May 2, 1974; and Frank Starr, "Nixon Date: a Raw, Rare Insight," *Chicago Tribune* May 1, 1974.]